**“Experts Say Fairy Tales Not So Happy Ever After”**

**by Amy Patterson-Neubert**

Liz Grauherholz, Associate Professor of Sociology at Purdue University, studied how beauty is written about in fairytales and whether stories with beautiful princesses are more likely to be popular.



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Fairy tales about pretty princesses winning Prince Charming are more harmful than parents might think, says a Purdue University sociologist.

Liz Grauerholz, an associate professor of sociology, teamed with Lori Baker-Sperry, an assistant professor of women's studies at Western Illinois University and a former Purdue graduate student, to study how beauty is written about in fairy tales and whether stories with beautiful princesses are more likely to be popular. Grauerholz says parents need to be aware that some stories tell children that unattractive people are more likely to be evil and reinforce traditional gender roles that may be confusing for today's young women.

"Fairy tales, which are still read by millions of American children, say it pays to be pretty," Grauerholz says. "It's important to understand the messages our children receive about traditional gender roles, especially during a time when women are encouraged to be independent and rely on their brains rather than beauty.

"Women today – despite increasing independence for many – still tend to value beauty and appearance. Why is it that attractive women and men are socially rewarded more than unattractive people? From early childhood, girls are read fairy tales about princesses who achieve vast riches simply because their beauty makes them special. That's a powerful message that can inhibit young women who feel they do not meet society's expectation of what it means to be attractive."

Grauerholz and Baker-Sperry examined 168 Brothers Grimm fairy tales. These stories were written by Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm in the 1800s and were used in central Europe to teach children the roles boys and girls should play, as well as what it means to be good or bad. Of the tales analyzed, 43 percent have been reproduced in children's books or movies.

The five tales that have been reproduced more than 101 times are "Cinderella," "Snow White," "Briar Rose" (also known as "Sleeping Beauty"), "Little Red Cap" (also known as "Little Red Riding Hood") and "Hansel and Gretel."

Their study "The Pervasiveness and Persistence of the Feminine Beauty Ideal in Children's Fairy Tales" appeared in October's Gender & Society. The study was supported by the Purdue [Department of Sociology and Anthropology](http://www.sla.purdue.edu/academic/soc/).

The researchers found that the majority of fairy tales that survived into the 20th century feature characters with young, beautiful princesses. This trend reinforces the message to children that physical attractiveness is an important asset women should aim to achieve and maintain, Baker-Sperry says.

"Fairy tales are important historically because they provide children with information about a certain period," Baker-Sperry says. "What they don't do is provide positive images about groups who are not white, middle-class or heterosexual.

"We don't discourage children from reading fairy tales, even with these misleading stereotypes and failure to include minorities, but we strongly recommend parent or adult interaction while children read or view fairy tales."

In the recent film "Shrek," which follows a traditional fairy tale format, the beautiful maiden lives happily ever after when she is transformed into an ogre. Such retellings are few and difficult to achieve because they break with the traditional format, and the researchers say such attempts should be rewarded.

In addition to messages about the importance of beauty, the researchers also are concerned that fairy tales' messages of how looks can label a person as good or bad are harmful to children. For example, evil was associated with ugly in 17 percent of the stories. In many tales, ugly people were punished.

Their analysis also showed that 94 percent of the Grimms' fairy tales acknowledged physical appearance, and the average references per story were 13.6. In one story, there were 114 beauty references for women. In comparison, the number of beauty references for men did not exceed 35 per story.

"What is striking is the way in which women's beauty is mentioned," Grauerholz says. "In 'The Pink Flower' a maiden is described as 'so beautiful that no painter could ever have made her look more beautiful.' In 'The Goose Girl at the Spring,' a character's beauty is compared to a miracle. In other tales, a woman is so beautiful it can cause her danger."

These powerful messages that say women need to be beautiful may compel some women to seek beauty at the expense of other pursuits, such as careers or education, Grauerholz says.

"Hearing these messages that were created by an old, patriarchal society may cause women, especially young girls, to withdraw from activities or careers, such as competitive sports or hard labor, because it is not part of being feminine," Grauerholz says. "This continued emphasis on beauty is a way society controls girls and women. Women adopt behaviors that reflect and reinforce their relative powerlessness, which can lead to limiting a woman's personal freedom, power and control.”

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